A GIFT OF PERSIAN SILK RUGS

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Through the generosity of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the Museum's already outstanding collection of oriental rugs has been enriched by five magnificent Persian silk rugs of the so-called Polish, or Polonaise, type. Brocaded with silver and silver-gilt threads, they represent the most luxurious products of Persian looms of the first half of the seventeenth century.

As a number of carpets of this type came from noble Polish families and also bear Polish coats of arms, they were regarded for some time as having been made in Poland. But this theory was long ago discarded, and it is generally accepted that the “Polish” rugs were woven during the seventeenth century in Persian court manufactories. Their patterns are entirely Persian in character. They have been found not only in Poland but also in the possession of the nobility of Italy, Germany, Austria, and Turkey. They were made not only for the Persian court but also to the order of European rulers.

Interesting references to Persian silk rugs appear in European and Persian literary sources. Many fine ones were presented by Shah Abbas (1587-1628), the noble patron of arts and crafts, to foreign rulers. In 1603 a Persian embassy arrived in Venice bringing many valuable gifts from Shah Abbas to the Doge of Venice, Marino Grimani, among them a silk rug, a coat of gold brocade, and a velvet with the representation of the Madonna and Child. In 1622 Shah Abbas again sent four silk rugs to the Doge of Venice, three of which are still preserved in the Treasury of San Marco. In 1639 a Persian embassy brought many gifts to Duke Frederic of Holstein Gottarp, including six precious silk rugs, today in Rosenborg Castle at Copenhagen.

The manufacture of the so-called Polish rugs started in the time of Shah Abbas. Most of them, however, should be assigned to the period of Shah Safi I (1629-1642) and Shah Abbas II (1642-1667). Both Kashan and Isfahan were the weaving centers for these luxurious rugs. Kashan was already in the sixteenth century famous for its magnificent brocades and velvets. According to Father Paul Simon, who visited Kashan in 1608, it was a rich city with a splendid palace that Shah Abbas had built for himself. Here, he writes, are made rugs of silk and gold, brocades and velvets and tissues of the Arras kind, that is, tapestry-woven fabrics. In the spring of 1601 the Polish king Sigismund III Vasa sent the Armenian merchant Muratowicz to Persia with instructions to order rugs for the king and supervise their weaving personally. Arriving in Kashan, Muratowicz ordered rugs made of silk and gold, tapestry-woven rugs, a tent, and other fabrics. The state manufactories, or karkhanas, at Isfahan, were established by Shah Abbas at the end of the sixteenth century. Here fine silk carpets, silk tissues, velvets, and taffetas were made, not only for the court and the nobles but also for sale in European countries and in India.

The decoration of “Polish” silk rugs is mainly floral, consisting of scrolling stems with large palmettes, blossoms, and lanceolate leaves, familiar in Persian woolen rugs, the so-called Isfahans, which are generally attributed to the looms of Herat in eastern Persia. The floral pattern is often combined with arabesques and Chinese cloud bands. Frequently the field of “Polish” rugs is divided into various compartments of more or less irregular shape, outlined by arabesque scrolls and rendered in different colors. Light shades, mostly pastel, are predominant in their color schemes, which might have been selected to suit the European taste.

The five rugs presented to the Museum by Mr. Rockefeller are among the finest examples known, and they reveal all the decorative splendor of their type.

These rugs are on exhibition in Gallery H 10, with another of the same kind presented by Mr. Rockefeller in 1945.
Persian silk rug, first half of the XVII century. The compartments are dark blue, salmon red, and silver or gold. One of a pair. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1950
Persian silk rug, first half of the XVII century. The compartments are yellow, salmon red, green, brown, silver, or gold. One of a pair. Gift of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., 1950.